SETH GORDON, THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Ozone House Drop-in center employee Rodrecus "BMC" Tratt, 21, and Ypsilanti resident Thaddeus Young, 16, work on sketches for the artwork they plan to display at Abe's Coney Island as part of Rock the Block, on Aug. 4.

Youths make it happen

Ozone House residents spearhead cleanup

BY SETH GORDON
News Staff Reporter

Nearly a year after finding a permanent home for their drop-in center at 102 N. Hamilton St., youth from Ozone House now have their sights set on beautifying their new neighborhood.

Ozone House has teamed with the Washtenaw County Department of Community Development and Abe's Coney Island owner Abe Asani to spruce up the parking lot and storefronts on the corner of Hamilton Street and Michigan Avenue in downtown Ypsilanti.

"Rock the Block" will take place Saturday, Aug. 4, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and will include general cleanup, exterior painting and planting flowers.

"It's an opportunity to beautify the block, but to also make it appear safer," Ozone House Youth Development Director Colleen O'Brien says. "I think that that is always a concern in any downtown community, making it look more inviting, safer and cleaner."

Annette Rook from the Washtenaw County Department of Community Development said the event is also aimed to support Dos Hermanos market, which recently opened in the building.

"There wasn't much access to healthy food in that area," said Rook. "A primary motivation is to improve the location so that it's a nice place for people to shop for healthy food."

Asani also has agreed to display artwork produced by area youth who frequent the drop-in center in the windows of the restaurant.

Rodrecus Tratt, a 21-year-old drop-in center worker who used the center when he was a teen, says most of the

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Rock the Block

What: A volunteer cleanup at the corner of Hamilton Street and Michigan Avenue to help support Dos Hermanos Market, build community, make Ypsilanti more walkable and enhance the safety of the shopping area. Activities will include painting exterior buildings and planting flowers.

When: Saturday, Aug. 4, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Information: Contact Ozone House's Colleen O'Brien at 734-829-0122 or Annette Rook at the Washtenaw County Department of Community Development at 734-622-9015.

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'They do a great job'

Abe Asani, owner of Abe's Coney Island in Ypsilanti, has volunteered space for youth artwork.

kids are excited to help out because they frequent the market and the diner, and are friendly with Asani.

"He has been really supportive of this idea," O'Brien says. "I don't think you would find a lot of business owners who would say 'Yes, bring me some of the art the youth want to create and I will put it in my windows.'"

Also known as "BMC" or "Benevolent MC," Tratt is a poet and graphic artist. He plans to create a mural for display at the restaurant.

"Youth love to do things like this because it's a form of self expression," Tratt says. "Any opportunities to put their artwork up, I want the kids to know about."

Tratt also believes the project can help empower youth in the area to take pride in their community.

"Our old house, on the strip, got condemned, so we've been there before," Tratt says. "That's why I feel like it's a personal thing to go out and help this store build their spot up, because Ypsi is getting a little run down."

Asani, who owns the properties adjacent to the diner and leased the space to the Dos Hermanos market, has been happy to support the market and will have the exteriors power-washed and help the county pay for supplies for the event.

"They do a great job," Asani said. "They have all kinds of food, fresh meat, fresh vegetables. The customers of Ypsilanti are happy."

"Rock the Block" is unique from other work-day events, such as Ypsilanti PRIDE Day, not only because of the cooperation with one business owner, but because it is driven by young people.

"It will send a message to everyone in the community that the youth of Ypsilanti really want to be a part of Ypsilanti," O'Brien says.

"They want things to be safe, they want things to be clean, they want things to be beautiful. They're a community of young folks who are capable of making all of that happen, it's just hooking them up with the right opportunity."

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